

RollPlay

GM

NOTEBOOK

ISSUE 2

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Welcome, Patrons!

Issue Two of the GM's Notebook takes a look at the sudden turn that Court of Swords seems to have taken after Episode 8 and how I've adapted and built on that, shall we say, tragedy. We also take a look at the first page of my Swan Song notes, where I share some insight into how that campaign started.

When I started looking at all my old notes, I realized that there's a lot there, so we'll try and do a page at a time, maybe two once I get to the Mirrorshades content, and if you find yourself wanting to ask questions, I could definitely see us adding a "Letter to the GM" section where you can ask about anything you see in the GM's Notebook.

As always, thank you for backing and I hope you enjoy this month's little zine.

Adam Koebel

RollPlay GM

THE AFTERMATH OF CHAPTER ONE

With the death of the Magistrates at the hand of Arrak val Khmaw's shadow servants, the Necromancer begins a campaign of terror and death in the riverlands. Those slain in Sư Phòn Thịnh become shadows themselves, or food for a growing cadre of ghouls. Within a few weeks, all the surviving farms and fishing villages along the river are turned and Arrak, by the grace of the Mara, controls a sizeable force of zombies, skeletons, ghouls and shadows in addition to the lieutenants of his fallen legion.

When we move North, to the lands where the Court of Coins and the Court of Swords overlap, this conflict will fade into the background; a shadowy stain spreading slowly across the map. The Court of Swords will send additional magistrates to investigate - these ones better equipped and accompanied by

mortal soldiers, but without magic and the blessings of the Arcana, they too will end up prisoners or victims of the Necromancer. The darkness will only grow, slowly consuming the Riverlands until the Court has to muster their army against it. This process will take some time, and will create a backdrop of threat to the second chapter of the campaign. Eventually, either the PCs will travel south to see it for themselves, or we'll see Arrak val Khmaw become Necromancer King and his armies will come North to the gates of the capital. All in time.

As for the Kobolds and the Bandits in the region? Well, since all the lands that kept them in gold and plunder were suddenly cursed by darkness, they'll likely be displaced. The Kobolds will follow the Dwarves - higher into the hills and away from human trouble, where they'll cause

difficulty for the clans who've joined their siblings in their mountain halls. The Bandits will either join with Khmaw, or be displaced into other, less polluted land.

As for Thuy, last seen in the hands of the Kobolds? Well, the Arcana find uses for us all. Perhaps she'll fight her way free and into the hands of the

Chariot, who might train her to be its instrument of war. Maybe she escapes, and the Devil gets her - obsession over the Magistrates who left her for dead and the murder of her brother eating her from the inside. Or maybe a traveller finds her on his way out of this ruined land, someone who understands terrible change all too well...

FIRST THOUGHTS ON CHAPTER TWO



We decided, as a group, to check out some other part of the world of Court of Swords without bending the core premise of the game too hard. After a bit of discussion and debate, we landed on staying connected to the Court itself, but giving ourselves a little more freedom and changing the perspective we have on the ways that the Court of Swords calls on citizens

to protect and defend it. Since I had mentioned during the prologue that there were tensions on the border between Swords and Coins, we decided to take a closer look at that - to find out why, perhaps, the Court of Swords wasn't able to send troops to assist in Sư Phồn Thịnh.

The premise of the second chapter

started as “what if we’re mercenaries, hired by the Court” and evolved into a more focused concept. If, as we posited in the earliest parts of the campaign, all the Courts are ostensibly allied to one another how do they come into conflict? Any such conflict would have to be a cold war, as open aggression against any Court would immediately draw the ire of the remaining two. Since we know the Court of Swords to be relatively aggressive towards her neighbors, we talked about ways that they might employ less obvious agents to do their bidding. What we settled on is, I think, a classic premise. A group of criminals who have been promised pardon for their crimes (whatever they might be) on the condition that they serve the Court. Disposable elements chosen to do jobs that the Court is unwilling to risk publicly engaging in. People the Court can use and discard. Low-lifes and scum (or, at least, those falsely accused thereof) who’ve spent time in harsh prisons and are willing to do what needs to be done. The tension of authority and duty, promise and lies and the politically-motivated structure of the idea appealed to us, as a group. Plus, who doesn’t like being a bit of a bad egg?

So, what we’re going to start with for Chapter Two is this; the players are a group of criminals who have been bonded to one another, likely with a curse of some sort, monitored by a member of a secret element of the Court of Swords and tasked with sensitive and dangerous objectives in a cold-war disputed area of the Court. They’ll deal with agents of both Courts and with the servants of the Mara, who are drawn to conflict, especially secret conflict. It should give me plenty to work with in terms of opposition and I love a good political / war background to my adventures.

I’ve been thinking about some ways to introduce more classical “D&D” elements into the premise as well - looking at things like hidden or forgotten ruins in the disputed area and wondering why the area itself is even contested in the first place. I think there’s more to it than say, lumber or water or gold. Maybe there’s something else here. Something powerful that both Courts want to get their hands on? I suppose we’ll find out.

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Locations:

The Xulin Valley

- + Between the Court of Swords and Court of Coins
- + Desired by both, who both have a "legitimate" claim to it
- + Dotted with woodlands, ruins and a deep lake - a misty place with several ancient temples
- + Beautiful and isolated

Móng Vuôt

- + A Court of Swords fortress town on the southern side of the Xulin Valley
- + Built a thousand years ago, ancient and stately
- + Somewhat dilapidated, now

Bái Yá Monastery

- + An ancient library and monastery town on the northern Xulin Valley
- + Said to be blessed by the Chosen of the Emperor before the Courts had form
- + Populated by monks and learned folk, mostly

Peaceful Spring, Golden Bough and Prosperous Spice River

- + Three villages in the Valley, all with varying degrees of loyalty to each court

Episode One (or, ummm, nine?):

- + Start with a bang, they're in a ruin somewhere and shit's gone wrong. A dungeon encounter, most likely - some kind of fight and then they have to get out of the place they're in
- + Introduce that they're here because of the Court of Swords, show that they're beholden to it and cursed to serve them
- + They are where they are because Handler Kukrit got his hands on a peasant (some mushroom-hunter) who found an old ruin in the Forest of Dust and Ghosts, and he sent the PCs to investigate before the Court of Coins found out about the place
- + Both Courts are searching for something in the valley, ancient and dangerous, and Handler Kukrit thinks it might be here?
- + Small dungeon!

THE OLD MANS TOMB

The dungeon is an old tomb, built before the Forest of Dust and Ghosts. In it is the remains of Thousand Unanswered Questions, a monk who served a very early iteration of the High Priestess. His tomb is, as befits a monk of the mysteries, a strange

place. It has been, unfortunately, inhabited by strange creatures, since the presence of the mara in the Xulin Valley has increased, of late.

The tomb itself is a simple affair, a few rooms that once served to house

the corpse of Thousand Unanswered Questions, a small shrine to the Moon and space for the eventual burial of other honored acolytes. The tomb itself would have been abandoned before anyone else was buried there. After whatever befell those who built it happened and the tomb was abandoned, it likely lay buried and the land reclaimed it. The tomb itself is under the trees and earth of the Forest, with an entrance somewhere in the hillside, which its inhabitants use to enter and exit the cave itself.

Under the loam and dirt, a small clan of cave goblins (known by locals as moguai or mogwai) serves a giant spider, bringing it small meals and using its webs to protect their lair. They are hungry savage little munchkins and want food and treasure and to serve their arachnid master.

In the cave can be found:

- + 1x giant spider
- + 1x giant wolf spider
- + 10x cave goblins

The PCs “enter” the cave by falling through from above, and we begin the episode as the mogwai in the northmost cavern come to investigate the strange meal that’s dropped in on

them. Start with a bang!

The giant spider, called Zhu by the mogwai, waits on the ceiling in the main chamber, and if the PCs enter the room, he’ll attempt to web someone and then drop down to attack. He is big and scary but used to being served by his little gobbo friends. He’s not intelligent enough to communicate with the PCs unfortunately, and just wants to make a meal of the interlopers.

In the western chamber, the bones of the monk are interred, the moguai use his sarcophagus to store miscellaneous trash (along with some treasure, as well). If the PCs investigate, they find the horde of Zhu and the moguai.

- + 22 gold
- + 8 electrum
- + 13 silver
- + 23 copper
- + 3 bottles of wine (1gp each)
- + 3 silver bars (3gp each)
- + 1 gallon of ale

TOMB MAP



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“Monsieur Higgins, do I make you uncomfortable?”

SWAN SONG

The location of Earth has been lost to mankind ever since an event known as **“The Scream.”** Currently in Sector Asgard Sigma, a shady man known as WILBUR HIGGINS III leases a spaceship called the SWAN SONG in order to find riches among the stars. Needing a technician, he turns to friend and fellow con-artist PIANI PIC who happens to be a natural psychic as well. Needing muscle, he hires the mysterious mercenary MR. SICARIAN. Knowing that the crew has a well-deserved criminal reputation, Higgins hires a respectable Xeno-Archaeologist named VIKTOR K0VACS to act as the official owner of the ship and doctor.

SWN 1st Session Notes

→ "Pelado City"

→ (Kalaya Bia) smuggler

- PCs are in the capital city of the main civilization on Andoni (Gunnhild VII) with something they shouldn't have that they need to smuggle off-world. Local law enforcement doesn't necessarily know about them. Here's what they need to know:

- Andoni has a powerful, facistic government with a highly controlled population
- Andonian patrol ships blockade traffic in and out, the world is intentionally isolated
- It's rumored that there are alien artifacts on Andoni

Andonian Police

(Zandy on Andoni) Higgs contact (11 on lease terms)
↳ Scooter from Blockade Ships (Cyborgs 2000)

HP 5 AC 4 AB +3 semi-auto pistol (1d6) SAVE: PE 12/ME 15/EV 14/TECH 16/ Luck 13

Andonian Blockade Ships (ACDF-014, 016, 045)

HP 8 Speed 5 Armour 5 AC 4 +3 to hit / 3d4 dmg (reaper battery)
+spike drive (I) + atmospheric

[Sunbeam is Southern home on Andoni]

Chargen Notes

* Fix Dex/Con bug (Culture)

Things that Exist:

- FTL travel (spike drives)
- Psychic powers
- alien sentience
- cybernetic limb replacement
- energy weapons
- your debt to Sunbeam Multistellar

Things that Might

- giant robots
- nanotech
- cybernetic augmentation
- artificial intelligence
- gravity manipulation
- the planet earth

Things That Don't Exist

- FTL communication
- a way "home"

[3230 cred/month]

Characters:

Higgs

military nerd

• Wilbur Higgins III (Expert) Con Artist, Bounty Hunter, Asa

• Viktor Kovacs (Expert) Biotech Crew, Xenoarchaeologist, Andoni

• Piani Pic (Psychic) Comms Crew, Criminal Mind, Majid (Mandarian)

• Mr. Sicarian (Warrior) Soldier, Mercenary, Onintza (Japanese)

owned by a powerful Mandarin

Precognition
↳ + Biopsionics

(10) (10)

Andonian Cultural Defense Force: Motorcycle Speed: 1 Armour: 4 HP: 10
Patrol Car Speed: 0 Armour: 6 HP: 30

[Car Chase → Shootout → Foot Chase → Ambush → Space Chase → Rendezvous]

Mercon from Dresden

* Andoni is unearthing an alien device of hellishly destructive power, whatever the PCs stole, it ties in to that, somehow.

Gunnhild I-VI are barren rocks, Gunnhild VII is a gas giant
VI and VII are separated by asteroids

Excerpts from the GM's Notebook

Part One

These notes date back to sometime just before the first episode of Swan Song. They're in my notebook buried among notes about a Burning Wheel campaign I was running for my local group at the time and constitute the very first inklings of world-building I did for Swan Song. I think you'll see some interesting things in these first few pages.

I fully expected to come back to these notes and find very little that would endure through the game. I'd say most of the time when I prep for a session, I'm only going to use about 30-40 percent of what I've created. Which is okay, because campaign material is just a blueprint, not the final house. Even so, this stuff surprised me - there's a ton in here that endured all the way through. I planted some seeds early on that I managed to continue to go back to, to build on and to eventually weave into the ending of the arc fifty episodes later.

(Kalaya Bia) Smuggler

First thing I notice at the top of the page is just an off-hand note, a name and a title. These sorts of notes dot my GM Notebook in every campaign. Generally, I write pretty clearly and you can tell the difference between my pre and post session notes by whether I'm writing on the lines and how neatly each bit is. This note is definitely me writing during the session - a note to come back to. Someone to remember. Kalaya would be a thorn in Higgs' side for a good long time, until she got caught up in the whole Blue Fever vs. Mr. Sicarian situation way down the line. A seed planted in the first episode that would bear fruit much later on.

Pelado City

I had such a minimal idea of what the world was going to be like when we started - I had some thematic stuff in mind (you can see some of that in the "Things That Exist" notes) but really, nothing more than a starting situation. I wanted something that would show my new players the kind of world I had in mind, not just in a setting sense but in the sense that I wanted them to know what kinds of stories Swan Song would be about. They're smugglers, pirates and mercenaries. They're scummy jerks on the fringes of society doing dirty jobs to get by. Andoni was a perfect contrast to this - the fact that they were hyper-controlling space fascists made the comparison to the crew all the sweeter.

Randy on Andoni

What I love about this note is that I'm sure I wrote it and then you can see I've given in the strikethrough treatment. Poor Randy. Also, note my roleplaying guidelines for myself, nice and simple: "Scooter from Borderlands"

Chargen Notes

I made a few lists to help establish Swan Song as a unique entity in a very large world of science-fiction. Even trying to narrow down into sub-genres (semi-hard sci-fi, space opera, etc) doesn't fully get everything sorted out. This stuff comes, in a way, from the game microscope in which you, as a group, establish some firm YES and NO items for your

campaign world. I particularly like that artificial intelligence “might” exist.

Our first impressions of the characters are quite interesting, too. PCs in Stars Without Number are built on class structure first, then on training packages and backgrounds. I think we saw a fair bit of some of these things - for example, Higgs’ being a Con Artist was crucial to his whole character and obviously Sicarian was a Soldier through and through. Other aspects of the characters fell by the wayside. How many of y’all remembered that Higgs used to be a Bounty Hunter? I’m a big fan of my first Viktor Kovacs note being “military nerd”

Scene Flow

Something I’ll often do when I’m unsure of where a session will go, or I need to structure a one-shot is create a flowchart of scenes I expect to use. You can see here that I’ve got the game starting with a car chase and moving through a few potential scenes. This is a tool that helps me get an idea of what I might want to introduce to keep the session flowing. It almost never goes this way all the way through, but it’s a helpful thing. I’ll do more complex flowcharts as well, if I need more to fall back on.

Andonian Artifacts

This bit, hidden away at the end of the page, is maybe my favourite part. I love that in the first episode, we started to see what would work itself into the whole plot of the rest of the campaign. I didn’t know that the “alien device of hellishly destructive power” would be some fraction of an AI, or something related to it. This is the thing that would eventually lead us to Pi and to the Warmind and the rest of the AI shenanigans in the system.

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